

APHORISMS

FOR

Teachers of English Composition

SCOTT AND DENNEY



Aphorisms for Teachers of English
Composition *and* The Class Hour
in English Composition

BY

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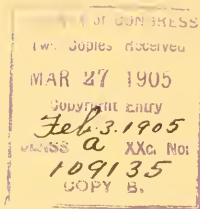
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Then said he, Give me thy hand: so he gave
him his hand, and he drew him out, and set him
upon sound ground, and bid him go on his way.

Pilgrim's Progress.



Aphorisms for Teachers of English Composition

THE TOUCHSTONE

The test of all good teaching is growth of pupils' characters. This is as true of composition as of any other subject in the curriculum. Perhaps it is more true of composition than of some other subjects. The very words that we use in talking of composition work have a meaning in terms of character. What is "unity" but a special application of integrity? What is "accuracy" but truth-telling? What is "method" but law and order? What is "selection" but wisdom and judgment, restraint and temperance? These and other terms of our work are "rich in second intention." They need not our preaching and enforcement. If we do our work they will do theirs.

The practice of composition, when it is well taught, arouses in the pupil feelings of health, power,

sanity and hope — the invariable attendants of mental growth. Badly taught it arrests development, and the result is a feeling of abnormality, a feeling of exhaustion, a feeling of powerlessness and failure.

What is the reward of the teacher of composition? It is the knowledge that from his teaching men and women have gained power—power to strike hard blows for truth, good government and right living.

Few things are more fascinating to a teacher than to watch in his pupils a growing sense for the power and beauty of the mother tongue.

To the teacher of English composition, preeminently among teachers, is given the opportunity to develop the constructive tendency in the young, the desire to produce something interesting and attractive, something orderly and sound in structure. Composition work is almost the only school work that requires more than facility in reproducing what has been learned in the text-books. Its rules of construction are the rules of all the arts and crafts. In leading pupils, through practice, to appreciate the meaning of these rules the teacher of composition is developing the art instinct in the young.

FORM AND SUBSTANCE

Whatever may be true of other races, we of the Anglo-Saxon breed have a deep-seated conviction that form is the outgrowth of substance, structure the outgrowth of function,—in fine, that what we *show* is just the lively countenance of what we *do* and *are*. The national consciousness ultimately rejects as hollow, useless and invalid every kind of form—in language as well as in ethics, in religion as well as in politics—which is not felt to be the outward aspect of some vital, enduring force.

The way to make the externals of composition interesting is to connect them with the internals. Let the large and ultimate ends of language shine through and transfigure the minutest elements. What do we teach these small things for if it is not to show the great things they can do? There is a way of teaching the very alphabet to the glory of God.



LIVING TO TEACH

The good teacher of English composition will so live as to furnish himself with inexhaustible resources for the assignment of subjects. He will be on the

alert for suggestions. Every day he will converse with some one about literature, about politics, about science, about art; so that he will at any recitation be prepared to say, "I have just been talking with a friend about such and such a matter. I think I understand it in a way, but I am not entirely clear. I want you to help me understand it better."

No one can teach English composition well who has not lived broadly and deeply, touching life at many points.

The teacher of composition, like the teacher of any other subject, should have resources far beyond his present need. The mere possession of such resources gives him courage, poise and self-respect.

To borrow Matthew Arnold's phrase, openness of mind and sensitiveness of intelligence are prime requisites for a teacher of composition. Tolerance, patience, energy, enthusiasm, a good voice showing a happy disposition, a warm heart and a capacity for humor,—these are admirable in the teacher of English; and if we may have also a sufficiency of scholarship, we lack nothing. If we must sacrifice, it shall be the last item; for if scholarship is desirable the other qualities are indispensable.

OF SYMPATHY

The English teacher's best asset is sympathy. A genuine interest in all that the pupil is interested in, a sincere desire to hear what he has to say, to read what he has to write,—this is the great secret of success in teaching.

My preaching will not improve my pupil's bad habits; my enthusiasm for what is commendable in his writing will start him on the road to self-improvement in all points.

There is no more powerful stimulus to good composition than the feeling that some one sympathizes and comprehends and wants to hear. How the feeling is aroused makes little difference. It may be no more than the teacher's chance word of encouragement dropped half unthinkingly. It may be but a look, a gesture, a kindly inflection of the voice. Whatever it is, it is enough if it tells the pupil that at least one person in the world is eager to listen. No young person—no old one, either—can resist that sweet solicitation. It is worth all the goads in the hands of all the drill masters that ever were.

If one recalls the leaden words in which teachers sometimes assign composition tasks to young and impressionable pupils, of the listless, hopeless air with which the pupils go about the work, of the relief apparent on every face when the disagreeable job is done with, need he wonder why so much of composition teaching is barren of results? The teacher of English composition needs to pray daily to be delivered from the sin of indifference. The human remedy for indifference to any work is a deeper knowledge of that work or study, and of those who participate in it. This implies for the teacher of English not only a deeper knowledge of the laws of composition, but also a deeper knowledge of the capacity, tastes, and interests of the individual pupils. Psychology at large is interesting; but the psychology of young Tommy Smith, as discovered in his themes, is much more interesting.

Every interest which pupils can have, the teacher of composition must have also. He must be able to say truthfully: Nothing in student humanity do I consider foreign to myself.

There will be no lack of interest in composition work if the teacher is really acquainted with his pupils and sympathizes with their leading interests. Primary

teachers seem to understand this better than the rest of us. There would be no trouble about topics for composition, for instance, if we had sufficient knowledge of our pupils. With such knowledge we should be able so to state and condition any subject-matter, and so to present it in assigning it, that curiosity would be aroused and writing would be eagerly undertaken.

Imagine a mother saying to her sick child, "What a nuisance you are! The idea of your falling ill when I am so busy with other things. It is just your natural meanness. Here, take this medicine and get well as quick as you can. I can't afford to waste much time on you." We should know what to think of such a mother. But how much better is a teacher of English who talks to a badly trained child in such a way as this? "What do you mean by spelling and punctuating in this ridiculous fashion? Where were you brought up? You write like a savage. How do you suppose I can take time to mark such papers as these?" Somebody once remarked that what the teacher of English composition most needs is a "philosophy of adolescence." The remark was laughed at, but is it not true for the kind of teacher quoted above?

Some books on rhetoric are written in an intolerant, hectoring tone, as if the writer were saying to the pupil: "You miserable little wretch! Don't you know that you are a child of Satan? If you are saved at all it will be through my intercession." Probably one reason why many a boy who wrote well in the grammar school writes poorly in the high school is that his rhetoric book has suddenly convicted him of too many sins, and he has come to believe himself beyond hope of salvation.



OF ORIGINALITY

If the pupil can forget that such a thing as originality exists, perhaps his writing will be original.

The teacher's "Write naturally, be as spontaneous as you can," is about as effective, and effective in about the same way, as the photographer's "Now smile, please."

Never say to pupils, "Now, I want you to write something wholly original." So shape your teaching that all the originality the pupils have will rush to their fingers' ends. Never say to them, "I want you to be interested in this subject." Interest them.

OF WASTEFULNESS IN TEACHING

Few processes of manufacture are so wasteful as the teaching of English — as it is commonly taught. A manufacturer of any other staple article who wasted half as much of his raw material as do some of our teachers of English, would be ruined in a twelvemonth.

Nothing in composition teaching is quite so expensive as scolding



THE DISMAL SCIENCE

“When we are plodding through the weary and dreary details of grammar and rhetoric,” says one of the leaders in education. Ill-omened words! Let *us* say, rather, “When with a sense of growing power we are marching triumphantly up the steep paths of grammar and rhetoric.”

Some people seem to think that any attempt to make rhetoric and composition interesting is flying in the face of Providence and common sense.

Some teachers regret that so indispensable a subject as English composition should be so disagreeable:

others have a grim satisfaction in the thought that so disagreeable a subject has proved to be so indispensable.



OF THE FASCINATION OF SPEECH

His native speech is to the normal child one of the most fascinating of all his interests. It is an early subject of curiosity. To acquire it is his first ambition. He never wearies of practicing it, and it is a perennial source of interest, amusement and joy. Only repression and discouragement and wrong-headed teaching can chill his desire to obtain a mastery of it.

Composition is no exceptional, spasmodic act confined to festivals and solemn days, or performed only at the point of the bayonet. It is a natural function going on incessantly in all normally constituted minds.

The child begins to compose as soon as he begins to speak.

The satisfaction which comes from the discovery of a growing power over the magic of words is one of the healthiest and most genuine of pleasures. "Would

that my tongue could utter the thoughts that arise in me," expresses the aspiration of all young and growing minds.



TEACHING BY THE YARD

It is a pitiful ambition in a teacher to want to get over so many pages of a text-book in a week or a month.



OF CORRECTION

Of what use is it to say to a pupil, "You ought to have more sense than to use such English," or "You write like a child in the fourth grade," or "This essay of yours is the stupidest thing I ever read"? Probably very little. But it is of much use to say to him, "If you will do such and such things, your writings will improve."

When a teacher puts down a pupil's composition and exclaims, "That sounds just like Jane," or "That's John all over," the composition must be good. Words may be misspelled; verbs here and there, may be on bad terms with their subjects; but no matter, the composition must be good. It will be better when Jane or John is better.

The main question which the corrector of themes should put to himself is not, How many errors can I find in this theme? but, How can I help the writer to improve? The whole class should be enlisted in this effort as they listen to the teacher's rapid reading of impromptu themes immediately after the writing. Let the class participate in the correction; let them commend; let them disapprove; but let them always understand that the sole object is to help the unknown writer to a better expression of the idea which he would communicate. When teacher and class are in this attitude, reproof is robbed of its sting, and criticism is eagerly sought.

"Theme correcting? I hate it like sin!" This was the exclamation of a teacher of English composition. And the hearer asked himself, musingly, "At what point, in an ideal scheme of pedagogics, would it be proper to introduce educational procedures that the teacher hates like sin?"

Who has not heard teachers of English composition make, in all sincerity, such comparisons as the following?—Correcting themes is like sawing wood with a rusty saw, like turning a heavy grindstone, like riding a bicycle in a strong head-wind, like carrying a hod of brick up an endless ladder on a broiling hot day.

Theme reading ceases to be a bore when we begin to look for signs of a growing taste and personal characteristic in the theme. It becomes at times a pleasure as we study the boy through his successive themes.

It takes long experience, superadded to a fine intuition, to distinguish between muddle-headedness and genius, between eccentricity and original power. Better go slow.



SELF AND THE OTHER SELF

When a pupil has learned to express himself, he has learned just half of the art of composition. When he has learned to communicate himself to his fellow beings, he has learned the other half.

To force a pupil to write with formal correctness when all the time he feels that his readers would prefer an off-hand, careless, helter-skelter sort of composition, is to fight against the stars in their courses. Better find for him a different class of readers.



UNIDEA'D CHILDREN

There is no more pestilent heresy than the notion that children are deficient in ideas for composition

work. Their minds swarm with ideas, and in a normal condition children will express themselves almost incessantly. True, they say childish things, but would you have them talk like a book? Healthy expression means the expression, in orderly form, of such ideas as they have — big ideas in big folk, little ideas in little folk.



BELATED

I once heard a teacher of rhetoric in a normal school spend half an hour in discussing the question whether a given specimen of synecdoche expressed an internal or an external relation. That teacher was born six or seven centuries too late. He should have lived in the age of St. Thomas Aquinas.



COMPOSITION AS A BY-PRODUCT

It is one thing to say that every recitation should be a recitation in English. It is another thing to say that these quasi-recitations in English will develop symmetrically the pupil's powers of expression.

Let us admit the value of models and the value of reading. But let us never admit that an art can be learned without practice.

Leave English composition without a teacher; leave it to be cared for incidentally by the teachers of the other subjects, and you practically abolish the subject.



BAD MARKSMANSHIP

Teachers of English who are recent graduates of a University often bring reproach upon themselves by transferring bodily to the secondary school the methods and aims of higher education. For the correction of this egregious over-shooting of the mark there is needed only a little common sense. Depress the muzzle.



THE CLASS HOUR IN ENGLISH COMPOSITION

Composition work can not be put on a recitation basis. Any effort to make it resemble recitations in other subjects betrays a misconception of its nature and purpose and is doomed to failure. Like instruction in drawing, instruction in composition is properly subsidiary and subordinate to the practice of the art. It is the ability to write and to speak that the teacher of composition seeks to encourage. In the traditional recitation in other school subjects the pupil

who can reproduce what he has learned from books will get along nicely ; in composing even a small essay, however, he is put into a very different attitude towards his work. It is now his business to interest, instruct, or entertain his teacher and classmates, and he feels that the duty of the hour imposes a need of exercising observation and inventiveness. This change in attitude towards the work is recognized by every class that has acquired the right spirit and by good teachers of composition everywhere.

The character of composition as an art determines class-room method in this subject. Go into a class in drawing and you find that three-fourths of the time the class are drawing ; the other fourth is devoted to giving necessary directions, to arousing interest, to studying models, to calling attention to principles, to personal help and criticism. We do not look for a brilliant recitation in drawing. We should not look for a brilliant recitation in composition. As in the drawing class, so in the composition class, the important thing is to get the pupils at work trying to express themselves. We should expect in the class-hour usually to find the class engaged in the practice of the art. Younger classes should usually not be required to write their compositions at home, and indeed with older classes it is best to have much of

the writing done in class. The outside preparation should be prescribed observation, note taking, — everything, in fact, that is needful in order that writing may begin. For this preliminary observation, or reading and note-taking, definite directions are necessary, indicating what the observer is to look for and what he may expect to find. In the class, before writing begins, it may be often profitable to let each one tell what he has found out concerning the matter in hand, in order that the total resources of the class may be made available for use by all. Without very much comment by the teacher these oral compositions will teach the value of clear seeing and truthful reporting. These two virtues, rightly understood, comprehend all that can be said on the subject of composition. Of course, pupils should be allowed to take home for revision and completion compositions begun in the class.

Practice at each class hour should have a sharply-defined object, that the pupil may learn, whenever he writes, to write with a purpose in mind. The purpose itself will impose artistic limitations upon the writer if he keeps it in mind. Both teacher and pupil should know beforehand what the purpose is, and the material supplied by the oral reports should be sifted in view of the purpose, before writing begins.

Suppose the purpose to be purely practical—to teach the class how to write a For Rent notice from given data; or how to write most economically a telegram communicating certain facts; or how to order a book from a publisher so as to bring the right edition; or how to describe a lost article for identification; or how to explain a point in grammar; or how to make a recitation in history, or some other school subject; or how to plan an argument so as to avoid confusion in a certain coming debate. In every one of these we have a purpose which prescribes what to say and what not to say, and what order to adopt in saying it. Though we are thinking all the time of the purpose and of the subject matter, we are also raising questions of art and are teaching the laws and principles of art,—unity, selection, proportion, variety, method and the rest. These questions are more easily answered when a particular reader is named beforehand.

Thus far, nothing has been said about the direct teaching of the mechanical parts of composition. Some of these are best taught through a study of models, and on such an exercise the class procedure more nearly resembles the ordinary recitation in other subjects. Some are best taught in the correction and revision of the pupil's work. Many

problems requiring comparison and contrast may be devised in order to teach punctuation, capitals, spelling, and the simpler procedures of rhetoric. Points in grammar are easily managed when two ways of saying the same thing are presented and the problem to be decided is which way is better in a given recitation or a given context. Memorizing brief selections of prose or verse often fixes an idiom, or an important sentence-form, or a convenient word-order. A list of the more important words of connection may be kept on the blackboard.

Still we must depend, in the main, upon individual correction and conference, gradually to weed out error. Sometimes an entire set of papers should be corrected for but one kind of error. No teacher should make himself believe that his chief business in life is to hunt every error out of its hiding place. That is the wrong attitude towards this work. No teacher should become a slave in correcting papers. A good teacher will always want to see what his pupils can do in writing and will never be without a set of papers; but when the papers become too burdensome, that is the time to introduce oral composition. We have hitherto underestimated the value of oral composition, and should give it a larger place in our work. Let all the preparation be made for

writing a composition. Let there be the observation, the questions, the conversation as usual,—everything but the writing. Then from a common outline prepared in class let the pupils speak in turn.

Time should not be grudged for the reading of models to the class, especially if the teacher can read well. The ballads, old and modern, are exceptionally good for cultivating a liking for strong, native vocabulary. Their homely phrases, once heard, stick in the memory, and they stimulate to original story telling. One of the chief uses of models as an aid to composition is in teaching structural unity. It is a pleasure to take a class with you through a narrative poem or an essay or a prose story, and as the reading proceeds, have them mark the successive steps, find the climax, and note how the leading details count towards a general effect. But all of these—models, memorizing, analysis,—are mere helps to composition rather than the thing itself.

For the thing we are eager for all of the time is to promote the power to communicate ideas effectively. Publication of some sort will help on the desire for this power on the part of the pupil. The school paper and the literary society afford some opportunity for publication, but the chief agency of publication

must be the teacher, who should not hesitate to take time to read from each set of compositions to the class, parts of several essays that have proved interesting to him. This practice will insure greater attention to form, mechanical details, diction, and grammar, and will lead to a greater desire to interest and please. Publication compels courtesy and attention to details. It discourages carelessness. It arouses the right ambition.

The class hour should be occupied more than half the time in writing or in oral composition; often in the rapid reading of models for the study of structure; sometimes in exercises that aim to correct general faults of detail; and often as the place for publication. So used, the composition-hour can not fail to become a favorite hour with the great majority of our pupils.

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